



12 March 2022

Dear President Polák,
Dear Libor,

It was with a heavy heart that the IRF Board of Directors (BOD) read your email dated 08 March 2022. We were dismayed to learn of the SVoČR decision to not send any rafting teams to the 2022 R4 World Rafting Championships in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The IRF recognises the SVoČR as a loyal and strong supporter of the IRF family of rafters, and a pillar of the IRF organisation. The talent and winning determination of Czech rafters at IRF World Rafting Championship races and other IRF races has inspired countless rafters around the world.

As you are aware, the IRF was founded on a platform of peace, with a mission to contribute to peace by uniting the global family of rafting athletes in peaceful competition beyond all political disputes. International sport has unfortunately always been used for political purposes, dating back to the first Olympiads of ancient Greece. Insisting otherwise, as many global sporting bodies have long done, shows wilful disregard for reality. Sadly, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the brutal war that is taking place, has placed sport in a dilemma unmatched in history.

During the IRF's entire history, we have deliberately chosen not to punish athletes for acts of aggression by their government if they are not actively participating in them. The IRF BOD appreciates your acceptance of this mission, and recognises the power of your statement that SVoČR 'fundamentally rejects the principles of collective guilt.'

There is no doubt that the act of banning Russian athletes from IRF competition, especially those who have expressed their opposition to this war, punishes victims of Russia's autocracy. It serves Vladimir Putin's regime by reducing opportunities to build friendships and to exchange ideas between Russians and people from other nations. A major reason why the BOD has accepted that athletes from Russia participate in our events is that the Russian Rafting Federation (RRF) has voiced its opposition to war and support of peace, and stated that they do not support nor have any involvement in the Russian government's actions. This is a very different position from, for example, the Russian Canoe Federation which has issued public statements in favour of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We are keenly aware that in authoritarian regimes such as Russia's current electoral autocracy, it is extremely risky to express views offensive to the incumbent government. By attending the WRC and racing under a peace flag, Russian athletes will deliberately place themselves at great personal risk of imprisonment or worse.

In arriving at our decision, we considered the widely differing range of statements and opinions of other international sport bodies. Many have shown themselves to be nothing but opportunistic: neutral when it suits their commercial ambitions and political when they feel the need to swing in line with global opinion. We also carefully considered the opinions of rafting athletes and our national members, including the public statement of SVoČR issued in your letter to the BOD dated 01 March 2022. The BOD strongly agreed with the tone and content of that statement. However, the SVoČR request that the BOD suspend membership of the RRF was not actionable. IRF Bylaws are explicit that member suspension requires ratification by the IRF Congress.

The IOC Executive Committee was keenly aware that many sport federations cannot on short notice for legal or organisational reasons, enact their suggestion to ban Russian athletes from competition. They therefore suggested alternative actions. After deep deliberation, the IRF BOD chose to follow the IOC suggestion that “no athlete or sports official from Russia or Belarus be allowed to take part under the name of Russia or Belarus. Russian or Belarusian nationals, be it as individuals or teams, should be accepted only as neutral athletes or neutral teams. No national symbols, colours, flags or anthems should be displayed.” We have also followed the IOC recommendation “not to organise any sports event in Russia or Belarus”. A large number of other sport federations have also chosen these actions.

By our rejection of the Russian name, flag, symbols, anthems and colours, we are able to express our deep disgust of the Russian government’s invasion without punishing Russian rafters. By disallowing the name and symbols of Russia in our WRC, no athlete will represent Russia, and the Russian government will not use our sport as a nationalist tool.

We are under no illusion that any action on our part will have any influence on Vladimir Putin to end his war in Ukraine. However, what the IRF and our members can do is take advantage of the world stage provided by the WRC, to publicly support Ukraine and emphatically denounce this war along with all forms of war and aggression. It is our intention to make the focus of the 2022 WRC about the importance and necessity of unity, cooperation and peace in today’s world, and not about national pride or competition winners and losers. This war has not changed the values of our federation, but has strengthened our resolve to express them more clearly.

The IRF BOD absolutely respects the right of SVoČR to disagree with our decision, and we understand the historical and current sentiments behind it. We hope that you understand that our aim is to encourage all rafting athletes irrespective of nationality, to join hands at the championship and participate in this unique and historic opportunity to express our deepest values. To remain united in peace and to reject war, now more than ever. We hope that you will reconsider and encourage Czech athletes to join us in this effort.

Kind Regards,



Joseph Willis Jones

**International Rafting Federation
Chair, Board of Directors**

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